

Socio-Religious-Based Critical Digital Media Literacy for Disengagement from Radicalism for Ex-Terrorist Convicts

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to analyze the influence of the Internet on the involvement of former terrorist prisoners, as well as formulate a Socio-Religious-based Digital Media Literacy model that can support the process of disengagement from radicalism. To help this research provide a comprehensive picture, this study interviewed one female former terrorist inmate and her companion after being released from prison, as well as a representative from Ruangobrol.id. This organization cares for former terrorist inmates to become "credible voices" in educating the public about terrorism. This research uses disengagement theory and critical digital literacy to analyze data generated from interviews with sources and other supporting sources. The study found that there is a duality of the Internet's function towards radicalism; the Internet is a tool that can introduce the poison of radicalism to someone, but at the same time, the Internet can also function as an antidote to the poison, helping people who are exposed to it to escape radicalism. In conclusion, this study proposes the formulation of a "socio-religious-based critical digital media literacy" that combines technical and socio-religious skills to maximize the antidote function of the Internet.

Keywords: Digital Media Literacy, Disengagement, Radicalism, Internet, Ex-Terrorist Convicts

A. INTRODUCTION

Advances in information and communication technology, especially the Internet, have had many impacts on the social and religious life of Muslim communities in Indonesia. With the development of this internet capability, many people then utilize it for their interests. Both positive and negative interests. Not to forget, terrorists also see opportunities to use this ICT for their interests (Mishra, 2003), be it for the sake of spreading radical ideology (Gaikwad et al., 2021; Lock & Ludolph, 2020), for the sake of communication between their groups (Sang-Oun Lee, 2020), or for the sake of channeling their desires.

Apart from the dark side of the use of the Internet by terrorists, the Internet can also be used as an antidote to radical understanding. The use of the Internet for this antidote, according to this research, is important to be formulated as a preventive measure so as not to fall into radical ideas but also to help former terrorist inmates in the process of disengagement from radical ideas that were once adopted. Therefore, this research proposes the concept of religious-digital media literacy, which is digital media literacy based on religious ideas and values.

Based on the researcher's initial interviews with former female terrorist inmates, one of the major challenges for former terrorist inmates in the process of escaping the bondage of radicalism is to rebuild a moderate understanding of religious issues in Islam that have been left behind. To face this challenge, this research sees the urgency of Socio-Religion-based Digital Media Literacy as a series of abilities to form active and critical users who can technically use digital media to solve problems based on Islamic religious guidance.

Disengagement from terrorism explores the process through which individuals involved in terrorist activities disengage themselves from such activities. This theory suggests that disengagement from terrorism is possible and that individuals can leave behind their involvement in extremist groups. Various factors contribute to the disengagement process, including push and pull factors. Push factors refer to the negative experiences or disillusionment within the extremist group that motivate individuals to disengage. These push factors can include things like disagreements with the group's ideology or strategy, dissatisfaction with leadership or fellow members, burnout, or disillusionment with the day-to-day tasks associated with terrorism (Altier et al., 2017). This was confirmed by a former terrorist inmate who answered the question of why ex-convicts could enter the terrorist circle:

"the point is that they are people who are disappointed with the governmental systems in this country" (E. Setiawan, November 6, 2023).

On the other hand, pull factors are positive influences or opportunities that attract individuals towards a different, more rewarding alternative. Examples of pull factors may

include opportunities for a better life, access to rehabilitation programs or support networks, education or job prospects, or a desire for stability and a sense of belonging outside of the extremist group (Bjørgero, 2013; Firmansyah et al., 2022).

The theory of disengagement from terrorism suggests that push factors, such as disillusionment with the group or burnout, play a larger role in individuals choosing to leave extremist groups than pull factors (Silke et al., 2021). In addition, the theory highlights that a loss of faith in the ideology underlying terrorist behavior is not necessarily a prerequisite for disengagement. Instead, the negative experiences within the group and a desire for personal well-being and security drive individuals to disengage. This theory also suggests that the level of ideological commitment plays a role in an individual's susceptibility to pull factors. For example, less ideologically committed individuals may be more receptive to opportunities for a better life or access to support networks outside of the extremist group. However, while the theory of disengagement from terrorism presents a compelling argument for the influence of push and pull factors in the process of leaving extremist groups, it's important to consider the complexities surrounding the disengagement process.

In light of these arguments, a comprehensive approach to understanding disengagement from terrorism should consider the interplay of ideology, personal motivations, and external influences to provide a nuanced understanding of the disengagement process.

B. LITERATURE REVIEW

Most research on terrorist groups revolves around recruitment patterns and preventive efforts. In 2012, Daly, Sara A., and Scott Gerwehr (2012), examining the selection and recruitment patterns of the world terrorist group al-Qaida, found at least three patterns, including the net pattern, where targeted individuals are sent videos or invited to special weekend activities. In the funnel pattern, a recruiter uses a gradual approach. Once the target is mature but still needs reinforcement in terms of motivation and identity, the recruiter sorts out potential targets and focuses on the group. In the infection pattern, a trusted special agent is sent to the targeted group to observe and make direct approaches. In the context of preventive efforts to recruit terrorists, Steven Windisch, Michael K. Logan, and Gina Scott Ligon (2018) concluded that to prevent terrorism, it should not only look at the pattern of the radicalization process at the individual level but also at the organizational level. And more sharply examine the differences in patterns in different extremist organizations. Emphasizing the importance of prevention, Yayla, Ahmet S. (2021), in his article "Prevention of Recruitment to Terrorism."

The Handbook of Terrorism Prevention and Preparedness" concluded that preventing terrorist recruitment is one of the most effective and least lethal methods to fight terrorism, not only by arresting terrorists but also by combining preventive measures and state policies, both at the level of individual terrorists, their families, and their immediate groups.

C. METHODOLOGY

This research begins by conducting library research related to themes related to terrorism and the Internet, media literacy, and Islamic values in media use. After obtaining an overview and academic debate related to the problem under study, this research will conduct field research. At this stage, the focus is on data collection using the in-depth interview method by adhering to a semi-structured interview model that relies on a series of questions around four main issues: the background of involvement in terrorism networks, the role of the Internet in the process of Internet involvement, challenges and obstacles in the process of disengaging from radical networks and thoughts, the strengths and opportunities of the Internet in assisting the disengagement process. Interviews were conducted with three key informants: one female ex-convict, one ex-convict companion, and the director of Kreasi Prasasti Perdamaian. They are:

1. Ika Puspita Sari, a female ex-convict who was involved in funding ISIS terrorists and almost carried out a suicide bombing.
2. Eka Setiawan, a senior journalist who accompanied some former terrorist inmates after their release from prison.
3. Annisa Triguna, Director of Kreasi Prasasti Perdamaian Foundation. A foundation that pays great attention to the education and assistance of former terrorist convicts after they leave prison

D. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Push and Pull Factors to Radicalism

Radicalism, particularly in the context of extremist ideologies and terrorism, has become a global concern that threatens peace and security in many nations. Understanding the push and pull factors contributing to radicalism is crucial in developing effective strategies to prevent and counter this phenomenon.

Previous research has identified several key factors that contribute to radicalization and the spread of extremist ideologies. Religious mentoring and culture (i.e., cultural desertification

in Jordan) play a significant role in radicalization, as they can provide justifications and motivations for violent extremism (Mbugua et al., 2019; Winter et al., 2017). This is what Ika Puspita Sari admitted when talking about the beginning of her involvement in a terrorist group:

"We were given PPTs, audio recordings containing lectures, videos, and writings shared in different social media group's platforms." (I. P. Sari, December 6, 2023)

In addition to religious and cultural factors, other elements such as political (Bahrul Khoir, 2021), ideological (Asrori et al., 2020; Islamy, 2021; Rofiq, 2014). In this case, Ika said that one of the ideologies instilled in this terrorist group is:

"If you want to intercede for your parents, then the best way is through jihad. And the most important jihad is to perform "amaliyah" (suicide bombing) (I. P. Sari, December 6, 2023)

Another factor that also influences a person's decision to join a terrorist environment is psychological factors (Borum, 2004; Webber & Kruglanski, 2016). As it was confirmed by Ika when he said:

"Yes, I used to live in Bangkok, I was influenced a lot by social interactions, from the information I got, jihad can atone for sins. I used to see videos of mujahideen fighting jihad, I felt sad. How come they were fighting jihad while I was still here even though I had many sins and do nothing." (I. P. Sari, December 6, 2023)

Apart from the factors mentioned above, other factors such as social conditions (Milla et al., 2022), economics (Arifuddin & Faridah, 2021; Sayuti, 2020), and education also contribute to radicalization (Krueger & Malečková, 2003). These factors create an environment conducive and permissive to extremist beliefs and actions. In addition, it is known that individuals who have experienced discrimination, lack of identity, or struggles in life are more vulnerable to radicalization (Husein, 2017). This fact was also expressed by Ika when she was asked what her initial motivation was for carrying out the 'amaliyah' suicide bombing:

"...the ones who are called to do jihad are men, while women are just supporters. But I saw none of the men were brave enough, so why don't I do that."

Research shows that online media has revolutionized the way terrorist narratives are disseminated, providing a platform for terrorists to connect with like-minded individuals at a global level (Meleagrou-Hitchens et al., 2017). Additionally, the use of online media allows lonely individuals to be part of a virtual extremist community without the need to be physically present at a specific time and place for radicalization and indoctrination (Behr et al., 2013). This has greatly increased the reach and influence of extremist groups, as they can now recruit

and radicalize individuals from across the world with ease. Moreover, the Internet and social media provide a platform for extremists to disseminate propaganda, recruit new members, and promote their ideologies (Marinov, 2021).

Digital Media and The Disengagement Process

The rise of digital media has profoundly impacted various aspects of society, including the spread of radical ideologies. While digital media has often been associated with the dissemination of extremist content, it also holds the potential to play a significant role in countering violent extremism and facilitating disengagement from radicalism.

The dynamics of digital media and its influence on radicalization and extremist ideologies are complex and multifaceted (Sholihin & Kurnia, 2023; Sunarto, 2017). It is important to understand that digital media is not only a conduit for extremist content but also a platform for countering these ideologies and encouraging disengagement from radicalism. This research shows that while the Internet and social media provide opportunities for extremists to spread their message and recruit new members, they also offer alternative narratives and resources for disengagement.

The complexity of the digital media landscape goes beyond the spread of extremist content and involves the interplay of online interactions, individual vulnerabilities, and sociopolitical factors. Social media platforms create virtual environments in which extremist viewpoints can spread. Still, they also offer opportunities to challenge and criticize these narratives by delivering alternative messages from former terrorist convicts (Van Eerten et al., 2019).

Alternative messaging strategies can be effective in facilitating disengagement from organizations based on ideology and violence. This strategy could focus on highlighting the negative impacts on family and peer relationships that result from involvement in extremism, as well as the high levels of violence and hypocrisy within the group's leadership and among rank-and-file members. In this case, the media plays a major role in spreading these alternative messages (Windisch et al., 2016).

These alternative messages will be stronger if they are conveyed by credible voices, namely former convicts directly involved in the movement. This can be done by *"writing counter-radical stories. Ex-convicts straighten out what has been deviant and become a lesson"* (E. Setiawan, November 6, 2023). Ex-convicts who actively work against the movements they once joined can help reduce recruitment by telling the truth about the movements and breaking

the image of romanticism that makes these movements attractive to some young people. This is what RuangObrol, one of the sub-divisions of the Prasati Perdamaian Foundation, is doing, which is embracing ex-terrorist convicts and returnees to not only share with the wider community about the dangers of radicalism but also the means for them to rise.

Additionally, it is important to recognize that the role of online platforms in radicalization and disengagement from radicalism is a multifaceted phenomenon. Extensive research regarding the impact of online platform algorithms in promoting and spreading extremist content and social engagement that contributes to adopting extremist ideology is also something that deserves more serious study. Specifically for matters related to algorithms, RuangObrol has extraordinary initiatives. RuangObrol collaborated with Facebook to enter around 500 keywords in the Facebook search engine so that when these keywords are searched through the Facebook search engine, the result is a notification to visit information from RuangObrol.

Comprehensive understanding and various initiatives such as those carried out by RuangObrol above are real, solute efforts in developing effective strategies to counter the influence of extremist content and encourage disengagement from radicalism in the digital era.

Promoting Socio-Religious-Based Critical Digital Literacy for Disengagement from Terrorism

The rapid advancement of digital technology has brought about significant changes in the way information is accessed, consumed, and disseminated. As a result, it has become crucial for individuals to develop critical digital literacy skills to navigate and engage with online content effectively (Promsri, 2019).

According to Briggs and Birdwell, individuals with critical digital literacy skills are better equipped to navigate online platforms and critically evaluate the information and content they encounter (Briggs & Birdwell, 2009). This allows them to effectively identify and challenge extremist ideologies, misinformation, and propaganda. In addition, a holistic approach that combines digital literacy with targeted interventions, community engagement, and ongoing education regarding religious moderation is needed to effectively address the root causes of radicalization and improve critical thinking skills among individuals.

One example of a holistic approach that can be taken is the "Hearts, Hands, and Heads" method. The "Heart, Hands and Head" methodology is a model of self-disengagement developed to assist former members of radical groups or their families. The method consists of three stages: First, the heart: The first stage is winning trust by highlighting shared and fluid

identities, identifying and strengthening alternative versions of identity and self-worth, and building or rebuilding relationships/social networks outside the extremist organization. Second, hands. The second stage is channeling energy and challenging clients, fostering personal and professional priority changes, and encouraging and guiding emancipation through education, entrepreneurship, creativity and sport. Third, head. The third stage is to exploit disillusionment and disappointment with their group's previous tactics and leadership, reinforce humane treatment by authorities, encourage acceptance by local communities, and encourage and change spiritual, humanitarian, or political beliefs toward rejecting violence. Mentors are selected based on their experience in mentoring members of radical groups or individuals at risk and their knowledge of extremism and violence (Brailey et al., 2023).

Based on the explanation above, this research proposes the importance of building Socio-Religious-based Critical Digital Literacy. Digital literacy includes new competencies and skills needed to use digital technology responsibly and efficiently and maintain critical awareness of issues developing in the global environment (Pötzsch, 2019). Literacy provides the ability to evaluate information and challenge, deconstruct, and criticize to find valid information and knowledge (Silvhiany, 2019). Literacy involves examining information in terms of its credibility and reliability due to the open nature of writing on the Internet, and understanding the social implications of digital technology and information (A. Spires, 2019). In Socio-Religious-based Critical Digital Literacy, these abilities then collaborate with the development of four social-religious abilities: first, the ability of religious empathy (the ability to understand and feel the feelings, beliefs and views of life of other people who may be different in a religious context). Second is the ability to have interfaith dialogue (the ability to participate in interfaith dialogue and open space for exchanging ideas, experiences and different religious views of life). Third, the ability to build inter-religious relationships (skills to build and maintain positive relationships with other religious communities) and contribute to developing a more inclusive society. Fourth, the ability to manage religious conflicts (skills to manage conflicts that may arise from religious differences in a peaceful and constructive way).

E. CONCLUSION

Socio-religious-based Digital Literacy in fighting radicalism among former terrorists is critical. The findings of this research emphasize the importance of using digital literacy based on authentic religious teachings to enable former terrorists to develop critical understanding, combat radical beliefs, and support their reintegration into society.

However, it is essential to be aware of the potential for abuse and manipulation of digital platforms by extremist groups to spread radical content and spread their ideology. Addressing the challenges and limitations associated with digital literacy and religious education is essential. While these efforts have an important role, they cannot alone address the complex social, economic, and psychological factors involved in radicalization. Therefore, it is crucial to complement digital literacy and religious education efforts with comprehensive strategies to effectively address radicalization's root causes.

A holistic approach that includes a deep understanding of digital literacy integrated reintegration efforts by building competencies related to the digital and social-religious world is the key to effectively overcoming radicalization among former terrorists. A collaboration between various stakeholders, including the government, rehabilitation institutions and the community, also needs to be fostered to realize these efforts effectively and sustainably.

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